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Joseph Kraft

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Goofs and Gaffes

President Reagan was back in his usual form for the foreign policy debate in Kansas City Sunday night. Sharp as ever, he showed gross ignorance of the subject—but reassuringly and with good humor.

Fritz Mondale clearly won on points. But the victory almost certainly lacks the eclat necessary to carry through to a Mondale win on Election Day.

One bad Reagan mistake occurred in his account of the offer tabled by his administration in the START talks on strategic nuclear weapons. In the debate, Reagan said that the first phase of the U.S. proposal dealt with land-based strategic missiles, and that a "second phase would take up the submarine launch, the airborne missiles." He said the Soviet Union "made it plain that they placed a greater reliance on land-based missiles. . . . But it was a surprise to us because they outnumbered us" in submarines and bombers.

In fact, the original administration proposal included limitations on weapons launched from the sea and in the air. Any other proposal would have been simply absurd, and the failure to understand that point betrays a true lack of grasp.

The U.S. proposal was strongly tilted toward limitation of Soviet land-based missiles, which would have been reduced from over 5,000 to 2,500 warheads. The supposed lead of the Soviets in submarines and bombers had nothing to do with that emphasis. On the contrary, the proposal was specifically designed to wipe out the Russian advantage in large, land-based intercontinental missiles.

If Reagan was surprised the Soviets spurned the offer, he was almost alone. Alexander Haig, in the memoir of his time as Reagan's secretary of state, writes that the limit of 2,500 land-based intercontinental missiles "would require such drastic reductions in the Soviet inventory as to suggest that they were unnegotiable." Assistant Secretary Richard Perle, the key Pentagon figure, has been quoted (by Strobe Talbott, a widely acknowledged expert) as saying, "Fortunately we can count on the Soviets to bail us out simply by not accepting it."

In his press conference of May 13, 1982, Reagan correctly said that "nothing is excluded" from the proposal. He then went on to assert that missiles "that are carried in bombers, those that are carried in ships of one kind or another, or submersibles, you are dealing there with a conventional type of weapon or instrument, and those instruments can be intercepted. They can be recalled if there has been a miscalculation." That seems not exactly foursquare with Reagan's claim in the debate that "I never ever conceived" that "nuclear missiles could be fired and then called back."

Almost equally fatuous was Reagan's discussion of his Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars" proposal, for a defense against nuclear missiles. Reagan made it seem the Russians would sit idly by while the U.S. developed a sure-fire strategic superiority. But development will take six or seven years at best, and would involve a break with the ABM treaty of 1972. The Russians would certainly go for the same kind of defense while maximizing their offensive capability in the interim. So the proposal, far from being innocuous, as Reagan intimated, means major escalation of the arms race.

At the beginning, Reagan seemed as bad in style as in substance. He meandered aimlessly through yet another incoherent defense of the mission of the Marines in Lebanon. He floundered in trying to explain away the "assassination" instructions written by an American and distributed to U.S.-supported guerrillas working against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In the process he overstated the CIA presence in Nicaragua and had to correct himself.

But he brightened visibly when asked about the age issue and got off a good one-liner: "I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience."

He repeatedly asserted that "my ultimate dream [is] the destruction of all nuclear weapons."

He scored a point in attacking, in genial style, Mondale's relatively weak record in supporting defense spending. He defended the administration's policy on immigration ably toward the end. At the very close, when cut off in mid-peroration by the exemplary moderator Edwin Newman, Reagan was graciousness itself.

Mondale stepped boldly into all the questions and showed genuine mastery on most of them. He repeatedly underlined Reagan's lack of knowledge and competence in many areas central to national security and American leadership. But having moved from loser to underdog in the first debate, he has to be held to a higher standard in the second.

He sounded tedious and looked tired, with bags under his eyes that seemed to reach to his knees. He was evasive on the nuclear freeze and his own past positions on defense. He never really nailed down the central point that the Reagan administration has not got its act together— not in Central America, not in the Middle East, not in dealing with the Russians. Propriety deterred Mondale from using correctly a vulgarism George Bush has been misusing. He never said the president lacked the ability "to kick a little ass" in his own administration.

If there is appropriate follow-up on the Reagan goofs, Mondale can probably maintain his forward motion. That may not be enough to win the White House. But it should head off a Reagan landslide and give the country and the president something both will need for a successful second term—a vigorous Democratic opposition.

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